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Arkansas's Multi-Agency Wetland Planning Team (MAWPT): *Advancing wetland protection in Arkansas by facilitating the assessment of wetland function on region-specific scales*

Introduction

Arkansas has made numerous advancements in their wetland protection efforts mainly due to the collaboration of the Multi-Agency Wetland Planning Team (MAWPT). This group coordinates efforts of several state agencies with natural resource responsibilities to better manage wetland resources. The six agencies of MAWPT include: Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission; Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality; Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission; Arkansas Forestry Commission; and the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. This coordination helps maximize state wetland conservation planning efforts using limited agency resources.

WPDG funds helped develop the multi-agency collaboration in 1992, under a grant entitled "Arkansas Wetland Strategy." This project commissioned four agencies to form a steering committee to jointly plan and implement a project in the Cache River/Bayou De View Watershed. Work in this watershed provided a general wetland planning approach that could then be applied to other watersheds. That original steering committee grew to include the six agencies of MAWPT by 1995 and has been entrusted with developing and implementing "The Arkansas Wetland Strategy," which articulates the state's plans to manage and protect wetlands.

WPDG Activity

An executive order from the Governor's office enlisted the MAWPT, along with the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department, was tasked with developing a wetland strategy for the state by 1997. The multi-agency work group met the challenge, partly through the financial support of a WPDG wetlands grant, and published "The Arkansas Wetland Strategy" in 1995. The strategy addresses the goal, "to preserve, protect, conserve, enhance, and restore the acreage, quality, biological diversity and ecosystem sustainability of Arkansas' wetlands for citizens present and future." The Strategy objectives, summarized below, aid in reaching that goal:

1. Achieve "no net loss" and long term net gain of wetland function and value;
2. Characterize the composition, function, and landscape patterns of AR wetlands;
3. Perform analyses to identify priority wetland protection and restoration sites;
4. Develop a better understanding of wetland characteristics and management techniques;
5. Increase quality and quantity of wetlands on public lands;

6. Increase level of public and landowner knowledge of and benefits from wetland conservation on private lands;
7. Support creation of urban riparian/wetland greenbelts for public use, education, and wildlife habitats;
8. Increase access and distribution of wetland information;
9. Develop administrative organizational structure for private/public mitigation; and
10. Develop state capacity for tracking wetland activity and long-term monitoring of wetland restoration and protection efforts.

MAWPT has continued to build on the strategy, developing tangible products with wide application for a variety of wetland stakeholders. One such product was "A Regional Guidebook for Applying the Hydrogeomorphic Approach to Assessing Wetland Functions of Forested Wetlands in the Delta Region of Arkansas, Lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley", published in September 2004. The guidebook built on previous MAWPT work which classified Arkansas wetland classes and subclasses according the HGM standards. Two examples of the wetland classification information are provided in Figures 1 and 2 below.

Wetland Class: Depressions
Wetland SubClass: Isolated Depression
Detailed Description: Mountaintop Depression

Wetland Class: Flats
Wetland SubClass: Non-Alkali Flat
Detailed Description: Hardwood Flat

*Figures adapted from classification data provided on the MAWPT website.

The regional guidebook provides in-depth assessment protocols for evaluating the most common wetland types occurring in the Delta Region of Arkansas in the Lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley.

The guidebook:

- Characterizes selected regional wetland subclasses;
- Presents the rationale used in selecting functions to be assessed;
- Presents the rationale used in selecting assessment variables and metrics;
- Presents the rationale used in developing assessment models; and
- Describes the protocols for applying the functional indices to assessment of wetland functions.

The protocols outlined in the guidebook are a valuable tool for wetland management stakeholders assessing wetlands in this region. This resource establishes a foundation that allows wetlands throughout Arkansas to be evaluated on a common scale, a necessity for long-term analysis that captures changes in the quality of wetland resources. The guidebook also provides a framework for evaluating less common wetland types in Arkansas and elsewhere.

Current Work and Future Plans

MAWPT published the Coastal Plain Guidebook in August 2005 and is preparing to publish three additional assessment guidebooks for the Ouachita Mountains, Arkansas River Valley, and Ozark Mountains regions. The fieldwork component of the assessment models has been completed for all regions, and drafts are in review for the Arkansas River Valley and Ozark Mountains regions. It is anticipated that all regional assessment guidebooks will be completed by 2007. The Guidebooks have allowed for landscape-level mapping of HGM types within watersheds. Long term monitoring of acreages within classes, subclasses and community types for remaining wetlands can be determined and lead to understanding which types of wetlands are being impacted and develop priorities for restoration.

For more information about Arkansas's Multi-Agency Wetland Planning team, please visit the MAWPT website (http://www.mawpt.org/).

Additionally, the full reference for the Guidebook is provided below:
Klimas, C.V., Murray, E.O., Pagan, J., Langston, H., and Foti, T. (2004). "A Regional Guidebook for Applying the Hydrogeomorphic Approach to Assessing Wetland Functions of Forested Wetlands in the Delta Region of Arkansas, Lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley," ERDC/EL TR-04-16, U. S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Vicksburg.

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